

THE CHANGING ROLES OF TIBETAN MOUNTAIN DEITIES IN
THE CONTEXT OF EMERGING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:
DKAR PO LHA BSHAM IN YUL SHUL

Tsering Bum (Shanshui Conservation Center)

ABSTRACT

Various roles of a mountain deity in the context of a Khams Tibetan herding community in western China are examined. The changes in the perceived roles of the local deity, Dkar po lha bsham, from warrior and Dharma protector to master and protector of the local environment has been facilitated by what locals perceive to be punishment for environmental destruction. Dkar po lha bsham's roles as warrior deity, Dharma protector, and master and protector of the local environment exist simultaneously. The emphasis on different roles shifts. Dkar po lha bsham is considered the protector of the local environment in times of great concern over ecological issues and discourse and, consequently, local community members have taken strong conservation initiatives in an attempt to restrain both locals and non-locals from mining and killing wildlife.

KEYWORDS

conservation, *gzhi bdag*, mining, wildlife, Yul shul (Yushu)

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND¹

I examine the roles of Dkar po lha bsham Deity in Gom ri (Gangri) Village, a Tibetan pastoral community in the Khams cultural region on the east-central Tibetan Plateau in western China.² The changes in the role of the local deity, Dkar po lha bsham, from warrior deity and Dharma protector to master and protector of the local environment has been facilitated by what locals perceive to be punishment for environmental degradation. Dkar po lha bsham's roles as Dharma protector and master and protector of the local environment exist simultaneously. Emphasis on certain roles occurs at different times to better interpret the changing socio-political and natural environment. The emphasis on Dkar po's role as master and protector of the local environment has encouraged local community members to begin strong conservation initiatives in an attempt to restrain both local and non-locals from mining and killing wildlife.

Gom ri is one of four³ *muyecun* 'administrative herding villages' in Hwa shul (Haxiu) Township, Yul shul City (Yushu), Yul shul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon Province (Qinghai). Yul shul Prefecture is an area of 267,000 square kilometers with a total population of 283,100 people (95.3 percent Tibetan).⁴ In terms of Tibetan dialects, Yul shul Prefecture is part of the Khams Tibetan region.⁵

¹ I thank Gom ri villagers for patiently replying to my endless inquiries, Shanshui Conservation Center and its patrons for making this research possible, and editors and reviewers of earlier drafts of this paper.

² Hwa shul (Haxiu) Township, Yul shul Municipality (Yushu), Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province.

³ The other three are G.yang thar (Yunta), Bskal nyi (Ganning), and Wa long (Walong).

⁴ Population statistics are from <http://www.qhys.gov.cn/zmys.html> [Qinghai sheng Yu shu zhou ren min zheng fu wang 青海省玉树州人民政府网] People's Government Website of Yul shul Prefecture, Qinghai Province, accessed 2 March 2014.

⁵ According to Lewis et al. (2013), Kham is also spoken in Chab mdo (Changdu) and Nag chu (Naqu) districts, the Tibet Autonomous; Dkar

Hwa shul Township has an area of 1,353 square kilometers, and is eighty-two kilometers west of Skye rgu (Jiegu), the Yul shul Prefecture seat. As of late 2012, local township government statistics indicated that the township had 1,309 households (4,840 people), all of whom are Tibetans.

This study was conducted in Gom ri Village, which has 269 households according to the official household registry, and a total of about 1,000 residents. However, according to local villagers, there are actually only about 150 households. Many villagers who are officially counted as being in separate households live in extended families in the same household. Since the late 1990s as part of the state's official poverty-alleviation program, a resettlement program has been in operation that encourages herders to abandon living in tents, move into houses, and lead sedentary lives. Sipeitao 'Four Allocations' was a policy initiated to encourage this by subsidizing housing for local herders, shelters for livestock, fences for enclosing grazing land, and fodder for livestock to enhance their survival during snowy winter periods (Foggin 2008:28, Ptackova 2011:2). The Four Allocations signaled the start of sedentary lives for Gom ri villagers. This movement was further promoted in the first decade of the twenty-first century when the Shengtai yimin 'ecological migration' policy was implemented.

The reason put forward for this project was that grassland degradation was the result of overgrazing. Herders were thus encouraged to reduce their livestock number or sell them, and move into towns. The state promised the herders annual payments – *shengtai buchang* 'eco-compensation'. This project resulted in about fifty Gom ri families selling their livestock and moving into resettlement houses at the Hwa shul Township seat, leaving only about one hundred families in Gom ri Village. The remaining villagers now herd between twenty to 200 yaks per family.

mdzes (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province; and in Bde chen (Diqing) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, as well as in north Myanmar.

Villagers annually receive eco-compensation from the government for having reduced the number of their livestock. The size of each family's grazing land determines the amount paid, and usually ranges from 3,000 to 5,000 *yuan* per person in a family. It has thus become a main cash source for villagers.

Caterpillar fungi, which has risen in value, is another important source of cash income in the Hwa shul area. As of 2013, the price of a single caterpillar fungus in Hwa shul ranged from forty to one hundred *yuan*, depending on size. Gom ri residents collect caterpillar fungi during the month-long collecting season from mid-May to mid-June. The village is also paid by outsiders to collect locally. For example, about 106 people came to Gom ri in 2013 and paid village leaders 5,000 *yuan* per collector. The resultant 530,000 *yuan* was divided and distributed equally among local families with larger families receiving more than smaller families. While yaks are raised for self-consumption, cash income is used to buy household utensils, wheat flour, rice, rapeseed oil, instant noodles, snacks, beverages, and so on; and pay for medical expenses, gas for motorbikes and cars, and children's educational expenses.

Geographically, Gom ri is divided into Gom ri khog 'Gom ri Valley' and Phyr mar gzhung 'Plain of Cheese and Butter'. As the terms suggest, Gom ri khog is a valley through which a river runs. Villagers live along the river and herd yaks on both sides of the valley. Phyr mar gzhung is a wide plain with Ser yu⁶ 'Yellow' Lake in the east and the village mountain deity, Dkar po lha bsham 'White Deity', at the south edge. People in the plain area live far apart. Access is limited because of poor to nonexistent roads. Phyr mar gzhung residents seldom gather other than for important work-related meetings such as receiving eco-compensation, horse race festivals, and such rituals as consecrating Dkar po lha bsham.

⁶ *Yu* is the term locals used, as well as how it is recorded in certain local texts, however, an interpretation could not be provided by the interviewees. They stated that the term *ser yu* - both words together - has the general meaning of 'yellow'.

Gom ri villagers consider mountain deities to be divine masters of their territories. Scholars such as Xie (2001:343) and Coggins and Gesang Zeren (2014:217) claim that beliefs and practices related to deities living in local territories predate the advent of Buddhism in Tibet.⁷ However, anthropologists such as Makley (2014: 231) state that mountain deities of Tibetan frontier regions are bound up with the expansion of Buddhist sectarian and monastic power from central Tibet to its frontiers.

Mountain deities, often tamed by Buddhist monks to become protectors of communities, are frequently referred to as *gzhi bdag* 'master of the territory'. Almost every Tibetan community has at least one mountain deity (Nyi ma rgyal mtshan 2013:21), who is related, or subservient to a more powerful mountain deity that holds jurisdiction over a larger region (Dge legs 2011:449).

Mountain deities have various roles. Buddhism emphasizes the role of *chos skyong* 'dharma protector' while lay Tibetans often use such terms as *dgra lha* 'enemy/ warrior deity', believing that the deity, when richly feasted, protects the villagers and helps them gain victory in battles (Nalanda Translation Committee 1998:402). They also have such roles as *gter srung* 'protector of local precious minerals' and *sems can gyi bdag po* 'master of all living things' (Tshe bhe 2012:27). The latter is usually shortened by Gom ri villagers to *bdag po*.

Ritual emphasis stresses these varying roles based on cultural, economic, and socio-political contexts in various regions during different temporal periods. In the case of Dkar po lha bsham in Gom ri Village, the emphasis on the deity's role changes from his historical position as warrior deity for village men to protector of minerals and master of living beings. These shifts are due to natural and man-made calamities the community has experienced historically, and recent discourses on environmental degradation and destruction to which community members are increasingly

⁷ By "Tibet," I refer to Goldstein's "ethnographic Tibet" (Goldstein 1994:76-77).

exposed. Drawing on the case of Dkar po lha bsham, I argue that the ritual emphasis on the symbolic roles of mountain deities shifts from one role to another based on socio-political, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions of the community in question during different temporal periods.

Figure 1. Hwa shul (Haxiu) Township (map by Liu Yanlin).

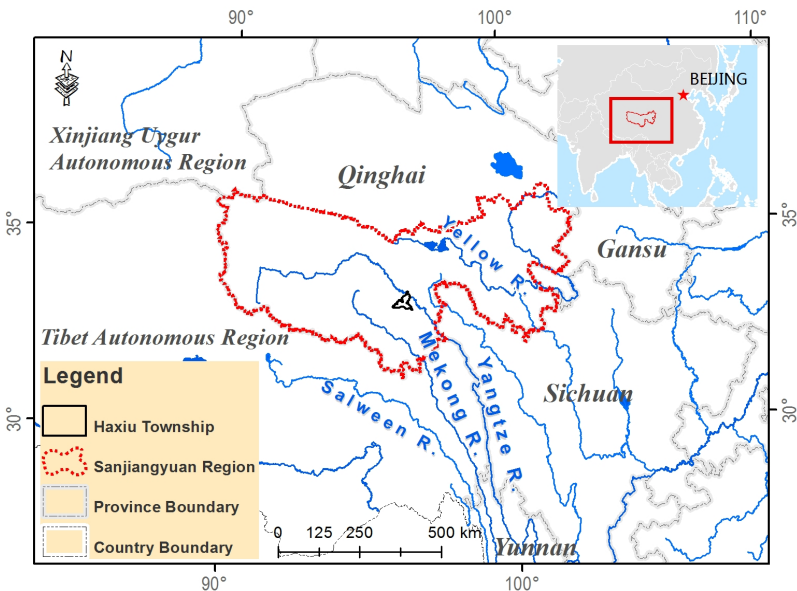


Figure 2. Dkar po lha bsham (Tsering Bum 2013)



DKAR PO LHA BSHAM: THE CASE OF GOM RI VILLAGE

Dkar po lha bsham, locally referred to as Dkar po, is a rocky mountain located at the southwest corner of Phyr mar gzhung. Dkar po presents a majestic visual spectacle, standing proudly with his peak in the clouds at the edge of the plain. When standing on the shoulder of Dkar po and looking down, asymmetrical lines of houses are scattered across Phyu mar gzhung, with Ser yu Lake resembling a giant mirror to the east.

According to Gom ri villagers and religious texts from Hwa shul Monastery, Dkar po is not local to Gom ri. Instead, he has an ambiguous "foreign" origin as shown in local accounts of how he came to reside in Gom ri that trace to Mount Kailash. Such accounts share similarities with origin tales of many mountain deities in Tibet – a smaller, less powerful mountain deity is linked to a bigger, more powerful one. This perspective anthropomorphizes Dkar po, and demonstrates that he was an uncontrolled evil deity before being subdued by a Buddhist who bound the deity to become a protector of Buddhist doctrine. 'Jam dga' (b. 1942), a local villager, suggested:

Mount Kailash sent his emissary to Khams. The emissary was Khu ga po, one of Kailash's ministers. Dkar po is one of Khu ga po's seven sons. The reason Dkar po came to Gom ri is Ser yu Lake, for there were seven *klu*-women living in Ser yu Lake, and he took the oldest one as his wife. Ku ga wa then gave two regions to Dkar po – Phyr mar gzhung and Ser yu lake areas – as Dkar po's property.

This perspective accords with lineage theory that traces a mountain deity's origin to another deity that controls a larger landscape. Khu ga po is a mountain deity in 'Bri stod, a county adjacent to Yul shul City. He is considered more powerful than Dkar po, and is more revered by Yul shul and 'Bri stod county residents.

Tracing Dkar po's origins to Khu ga po provides Dkar po with unassailable legitimacy, justified by accounts that have Khu ga po giving land to Dkar po. In this case, both humans and animals living in Gom ri are mere residents on Dkar po's personal property.

Gom ri villagers contend that Dkar po is *mi dkar rta dkar* 'a white man on a white horse'. "White man" refers to the color of Dkar po's clothing. Locals explain this reference by stating that Dkar po is a powerful man of magic who wears white clothes and rides a white horse. This description corresponds to paintings of Dkar po on Hwa shul Monastery temple walls, i.e., Dkar po is depicted as a man in a white robe, wearing a gold helmet featuring six flags, holding a spear in his right hand, and a *nor gzhung* 'treasure bowl' in his left hand. These images emphasize Dkar po's role as a warrior deity by Dkar po wearing a traditional warrior's helmet and dress, and armed with a spear.

Dkar po was not a white man on white horse when he first came to Phyr mar gzhung. Instead, he was a *mi nag rta nag* 'a black man on a black horse', meaning a man dressed in black riding a black horse. As described by 'Jam dbyangs bzang po (b. 1948):

When he first came here, he was a ferocious *gzhi bdag* who killed people with thunderbolts. He was very powerful. At that time, his name was Nag dus lha bsham 'deity of black time' – a bad name. He killed people with thunderbolts. Then a famous *bla ma* named Blo brtan came and converted him into a good *gzhi bdag*. Bla ma Blo brtan was the incarnation of Padmasambhava. Bla ma Blo brtan named him Dkar po lha bsham and turned him into a good *gzhi bdag*. He 'tamed' him like that and told him to be a good *gzhi bdag* and benefit all *sems can* 'living beings' - a good *bstan srung* 'Dharma protector'. He has since been good to all.

Dkar po lha bsham literally means 'white deity' while *nag dus lha bsham* translates as 'deity of black time'. This suggests that Dkar po has not always been the protector of local people, animals, and

resources. In contrast, he was a deity who killed and destroyed, but eventually became a good protector deity. This also implies that *gzhi bdag* are subservient to particularly powerful Buddhist *bla ma* and institutions, can be subdued, and their behavior and roles can be modified and determined through Buddhist institutions and personages. In this particular case, Dkar po was converted into a *bstan srung* 'Dharma protector'.

DKAR PO'S JURISDICTION AND POWER

According to the lineage origin perspective, Dkar po resides within the mountain where his palace is located, Gom ri villagers refer to this as *rdza ri rtse mo dung gi pho brang* 'high-peaked rocky mountain with a palace of conch'. His jurisdiction is defined by prominent landscapes and symbols that he has relationships with. For instance, there are certain rocky hills and prominent landscape that are believed to be Dkar po's kitchen, ritual implements, his livestock, and so on. These symbols signify the borders of his territory within which Dkar po has absolute power to punish those who dig caterpillar fungi, mine for minerals, and kill wildlife. Villagers believe that digging caterpillar fungi and killing wildlife within the "walls" of this landscape are strictly taboo. Those who violate these prohibitions are expected to receive severe punishment. These geographical markers stand out as borders of the conservation zone.

While the traditional jurisdiction of Dkar po limits the behavior of Gom ri villagers, official administrative borders restrict Gom ri villagers' conservation efforts. Dkar po is at the intersection of the borders of Hwa shul Township, Rong po Town, Yul Shul County; and 'Bri stod County. About one-third of Dkar po's traditional jurisdiction falls within the territory of Rong po Town. Consequently, when Gom ri villagers patrol Dkar po in an effort to protect wildlife and caterpillar fungi, they are powerless outside Gom ri's

administrative range. One patroller I interviewed lamented, "We are unable to stop people from collecting caterpillar fungi on the land outside Gom ri. Dkar po is not the *gzhi bdag* of people in Rong po, who don't care about protecting Dkar po Mountain."

DKAR PO'S VARIED SYMBOLIC ROLES

As mentioned earlier, mountain deities have various roles. Dkar po was given a role as Dharma protector when he was first subdued by Bla ma blo brtan. However, Gom ri residents believe he is also a warrior deity, mineral protector, and master of sentient beings in Gom ri. These latter roles are intertwined with the laity's daily lives. While traditionally Dkar po's role as Dharma protector and warrior deity is emphasized, a transition in roles is occurring. From his role as Dharma protector and warrior deity, he is becoming a protector of minerals and master of wildlife. The catalyst of this transition is because Gom ri Village and the surrounding regions have faced a series of natural and man-made disasters in recent decades that have negatively impacted locals' lives. Villagers explain the disasters as manifestation of Dkar po's wrath because minerals, animals, and medicinal herbs on his property were not protected. Villagers were motivated to respect and elevate Dkar po's role as mineral protector and master of wildlife, instead of enhancing his role as warrior deity or Dharma protector.

I will now give examples of local rituals, conservation efforts, and religious texts from Hwa shul Monastery, as well as interview records to substantiate this shift in roles.

PLEASING THE DEITY: PERFORMANCE OF RITUALS AND CONSERVATION WORK

On the thirteenth day of the eighth lunar month in 2013 (by the

Tibetan calendar), Gom ri villagers held a Dkar po consecration ritual that is held annually at this time. A man from each family is required to attend the ritual by bringing *rtsam pa*,⁸ grain, and juniper needles that are burned as offerings for Dkar po. I attended the ritual at the invitation of a villager. Men rode motorcycles, and sped towards Dkar po. We parked our motorcycles at the foot of Dkar po, and climbed up its shoulder for about two hours before reaching the *bsang khri* 'ritual altar', a platform made of stones. Four monks from Hwa shul Monastery officiated. As laymen made a fire with yak dung on the altar and burned *bsang*,⁹ the monks chanted ritual scriptures to call Dkar po to feast on the offerings. They also requested that he provide *bde ba* 'good life' for the villagers. As one ritual participant stated, the ritual helped them with *mi la na tsha med, phyugs la god kha med* 'people free of illness, livestock free from disaster'.

As is shown in the ritual scriptures below, when the monks chanted, Dkar po was called upon to act as the protector of minerals, animals, and other resources in Gom ri. The text was composed by the nineteenth Chos rje rin po che in the early 2000s. Chos rje rin po che (d. 2004)¹⁰ was the most respected lama in the Hwashul area. Part of the text describes rocky mountains, earth, grass, and water in terms of their association with *gnyan*, a term that appears frequently in the text. In Bon and Tibetan Buddhist religious texts, *gnyan* is interpreted as a deity of sky or air that traverses through rocky mountains and valleys (Gele 2011:450). *Gnyan* is also sometimes recognized as a *gzhi bdag* 'mountain deity' (Liu 2011:467, Gele 2011:449). For instance, part of the *bsang* offering scripture states:

¹བདག་ཅན་ཡོན་མཚོད་འཁོར་བཅས་ཀྱིས།

²རྩ་གཉན་གཡའ་མ་བཅས་པ་དང་།

³ས་གཉན་གད་པ་སྒྲིབ་པ་དང་།

⁸ Roasted, ground barley flour.

⁹ Ritual offerings of *rtsam pa*, grain, and juniper needles.

¹⁰ His incarnation was identified in 2014.

⁴རྩ་གཉན་ཅད་ནས་ཕྱང་པ་དང་།
⁵རྩ་གཉན་གཏིང་ནས་དབྱུག་པ་དང་།
⁶མེ་ལ་གཞོབ་སྒྲིག་ཤོར་བ་དང་།
⁷རྩ་ལ་བཙོག་པས་བསྐྱད་པ་དང་།
⁸ངན་ཤག་ཀྱི་ཚོ་བྱས་པ་དང་།
⁹རི་དྲགས་ཅན་གཟན་བསད་པ་སོགས་།
¹⁰གཞི་བདག་ཁྱོད་དང་འགལ་གྱུར་བའི།
¹¹བྱ་ངན་སྦྱོད་ངན་གང་བྱས་ཀྱང་།
¹²བདུད་ཅི་བསང་གིས་བཤགས་བྱར་བཅི།

¹bdag cag yon mchod 'khor bcas kyis
²rdza gnyan g.ya' ma bcag pa dang
³sa gnyan gad pa slog pa dang
⁴rtswa gnyan rtsad nas phyung pa dang
⁵chu gnyan gting nas dkrug pa dang
⁶me la gzhob slog shor ba dang
⁷chu la btsog pas bsad pa dang
⁸ngan shag ku co byas pa dang
⁹ri dwags gcan gzan bsad pa sogs
¹⁰gzhi bdag khyod dang 'gal gyur ba'i
¹¹bya ngan spyod ngan gang byas kun
¹²bdud rtsi bsang gis bshags bur bgyi

¹We as your servants
²Destroyed the rocks of rocky mountain *gnyan*
³Dug up the soil of earth *gnyan*
⁴Plucked the roots of grass *gnyan*
⁵Stirred up the water *gnyan*
⁶Fire is filled with the odor of burned flesh
⁷Water is polluted with dirty substances
⁸Neighbors have turned bad and argue
⁹Herbivores and carnivores are killed

¹⁰(All these acts) violate your wishes

¹¹For all the bad things and bad acts

¹²Please accept this *bsang* offering as our atonement

The ritual text above suggests that damaging mountains, earth, grass, and water, as well as killing wildlife on the land of the deities have taken place. For this, the villagers seek forgiveness from Dkar po through *bsang* offerings to him. This text also indicates that if villagers engage in such destructive activities, Dkar po will be angered and punish villagers via disasters, which I elaborate on below.

Traditionally such rituals are performed by Gom ri men to invoke Dkar po as a warrior deity to protect them in battles and conflicts with neighboring communities, but it is now a ritual that invokes Dkar po's role as mineral protector and master of wildlife. For instance, when I asked a ritual participant, Thub bstan (b. 1955), why women were absent, he replied:

Dkar po is the warrior deity of Gom ri men so women cannot come to consecrate him because there is no tradition of women having warrior deities. A warrior deity would *nus pa nyams 'gro* 'lose power' if women come here.

Despite the text repeated by monks during the ritual having nothing to do with Dkar po's role as warrior deity, this statement suggests male-only participation in the ritual was related to the primary function of the ritual - to invoke Dkar po as a warrior deity. Later, when I showed the texts to the same person, he said, "There are no wars these days. It's peacetime. We don't need to call on Dgra lha anymore. We need Dkar po to help us with environmental issues."

Both the text and the villager's statement emphasize Dkar po's role as protector of natural resources and animals, rather than his role as warrior deity. This emphasis has developed in recent decades in response to three issues. First, China's social and economic changes, and political changes in Tibetan regions in recent decades

have negatively impacted local ecosystems. Gom ri villagers interpreted the natural disasters following these changes as stemming from Dkar po's anger with the villagers' actions negatively affecting the local ecosystem.

Secondly, ecologists, as well as many Tibetan herders, have observed the degradation of the grassland ecosystem on the Tibetan Plateau in recent years (Gruschke 2008, Cencetti 2010, Han et al. 2008, Harris 2010). This realization creates space for new interpretations of local villagers' changing surroundings. Consequently, villagers blame humans for environmental degradation, and believe that protecting the natural environment appeases Dkar po, thus avoiding disasters that may befall locals.

Thirdly, mining in the Yul shul area is a very real threat. Despite no mining activity in Gom ri, there is knowledge of mining activities in neighboring regions such as in 'Bri stod and Chu mar leb counties. Gom ri villagers fear that outside mining companies will come and destroy Dkar po, leading to natural disasters such as earthquakes and snow disasters.

EFFECTS OF SOCIAL REFORMS ON THE LOCAL ECOSYSTEM STRUCTURE

Since the incorporation of Tibet into the Communist regime, the region has undergone massive political, social, and cultural changes. As did all of China, it experienced the chaos of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During these periods, as Huber (2012:204) points out in his study of hunting in Byang thang pastoral communes during the Cultural Revolution in the northern Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), many herding communities were required to hunt wildlife to meet set quotas. A local scholar also writes that in Rgyas bzang (Longbao Zhen), a town adjacent to Hwa shul, wildlife were traditionally hunted for food and animal products until living conditions improved, and wildlife protection laws and state control of the wild animal

market began to be enforced in the early twenty-first century (Bkra shis dpal 'bar 2011:285). Hwa shul nomads also experienced state initiated collectivized hunting of wildlife during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the discontinuation of the commune system in the early 1980s, irregular hunting of wildlife by Hwa shul herders did not cease until the early 1990s, when guns and rifles were confiscated by the state, ostensibly to strengthen wildlife conservation.

Reflecting on wildlife hunting during the Cultural Revolution, Bstan dbang (b. 1940) told me:

There weren't many disasters in the 'Jig rten rnying ba 'Old World', while many disasters occur in the 'Jig rten gсар ba 'New World' because there are many *srog chags gsod mkhan* 'animal killers' and *khор yug gtor brlag byed mkhan* 'environment destroyers'. Many wild animals were killed during the Cultural Revolution, which angered Dkar po and snowstorms befell us. We and our livestock suffered.

Affected by propagandist discourse of the Cultural Revolution, many Tibetans refer to the pre-Liberation period as the 'Old World', and Post-Liberation as the 'New World'. When I asked specifically which disasters of the New World had been caused by killing wildlife, he said that the two particularly devastating snow disasters – one in 1985 and the other in 1995 – were caused by the wrath of mountain deities incurred from the wanton killing of wildlife. Indeed, studies of snowstorms affecting livestock in Yul shul region show sharp drops in livestock population in 1974-1975, 1983-1985, and 1995-1996. These declines in livestock numbers were caused by snowstorms (Dkon mchog dge legs 2012:70), which damaged local people's livelihood and economy.

Villagers interpret killing wildlife as the cause of snow storms, which thus provides villagers more evidence to respect Dkar po as the master of wildlife, further elevating Dkar po's role as *bdag po* in Gom ri. This contemporary interpretation and perception of the difference

between 'Old World' and 'New World' constrains villagers' behavior regarding killing wildlife on Dkar po.

Villagers' worries about angering Dkar po in the context of environmental destruction stands out more prominently when mining issues are discussed. I stress that Gom ri Village has only observed mining survey teams sent by provincial authorities. However, locals are familiar with mining projects underway in neighboring 'Bri stod and Chu mar leb counties and feel that mining will come to them soon. Regarding surveys of possible mines from provincial authorities, Thos rgyang (b. 1961) stated:

Many miners came to Gom ri in the past few years. We must stop them. All the stones, plants, animals, and even land and people and their livestock belong to *gzhi bdag*. If we kill animals, *gzhi bdag* will become wrathful, causing earthquakes and illnesses. [In order to please the *gzhi bdag*] people must live in harmony, and only slaughter livestock for food. Slaughtering too many or selling livestock for slaughter will anger the *gzhi bdag*.

Mining has become a prominent issue across Tibetan regions in recent years. It must be noted that mining was conducted before Tibet was incorporated into the Communist regime. For instance, citing both traditional Tibetan texts and European accounts of Tibet prior to 1950s, Huber writes that "Tibetans from both the upper and lower strata of society were openly involved in mining for livelihood and profit," however, religious legitimacy was provided for these acts (1991:65) by performing rituals to appease deities and gain mining permission from deities through ritual performance. Most current miners in Tibetan regions are perceived to be outsiders - non-Tibetans with a transnational company background. There is no religious legitimacy for such mining. Local Tibetans see such mining activities as exploitation of local resources and destruction of traditional culture by outsiders.

Almost everyone I talked with in Gom ri related disasters such

as earthquakes to mining. Skye rgu Town, Yul shul County experienced a 7.1 magnitude earthquake in 2010 that caused the deaths of at least 2,200 people and destroyed an entire prefecture seat and neighboring villages.¹¹ Gom ri villagers believe that the 2010 earthquake was caused by mountain deities in the Yul shul area as the result of environmental destruction, particularly areas under the jurisdiction of mountain deities. In 2013, a Qinghai Provincial Geological Inspection Bureau team came to the Hwa shul area to conduct geological studies. Locals, including Gom ri villagers, stopped them from entering the village, viewing the team as miners, thus preventing the team from doing a thorough inspection. Gom ri villagers' objections might be summarized as: "If they find something valuable they will dig it, which will anger Dkar po, and he will cause earthquakes, just like the one in Skye rgu."

Dkar po's right to punish villagers by sending disasters is in tandem with a belief that the land and everything on it belongs to him, thus he shows no mercy to anyone who disturbs what he owns. Villagers' worries about mining stem from the belief that Dkar po is the protector of minerals in the region, and also that mining would destroy the very mountain that is Dkar po's abode. Villagers fear that such focused destruction of Dkar po's property would lead to calamity for people and livestock. In light of such dangers, villagers enacted conservation efforts and conducted rituals to venerate Dkar po's role as the master of local wildlife and protector of minerals. An impetus for this effort is related to a major snow disaster in 2005 that killed thousands of yaks and sheep in the Yul shul area, including livestock in Gom ri. Believing there was a relationship between previous major snow disasters and the one in 2005, locals consulted Blo bzang nor bu, a high-ranking lama of Hwa shul Monastery. The result of that

¹¹ Statistics are from http://www.csi.ac.cn/manage/html/4028861611c5c2ba0111c5c558b00001/_content/10_04/26/1272245175297.html [Zhongguo dizhen xinxi wang 中国地震信息网] China Earthquake Information Network, accessed 25 March 2015.

consultation was a speech provided by 'Jam dbyangs (b. 1975), who recorded it. An excerpt follows:

You should be able to protect Dkar po. Protecting Dkar po will benefit all living beings. It will increase your *gsod nams* ['merit'], not only for yourselves, but also for the world. If you don't protect this mountain, livestock may get ill, people may become ill, there will be snow disasters, the four elements [earth, water, fire air] will cause destruction to the world.

When Dkar po was first subdued by Bla ma Blo brtan, he was appointed to be the protector of the Dharma. However, in his talk Blo bzang nor bu emphasizes Dkar po as a source of disasters if Dkar po is poorly protected, placing Dkar po in the role of master of wildlife and minerals. Furthermore, while Dkar po was traditionally considered a Dharma protector and warrior deity to protect religion and locals, he is now being protected by the local people. After this consultation, Gom ri villagers met and decided to establish a formal patrol team to protect wildlife, natural resources, and such medicinal herbs as caterpillar fungi to demonstrate villagers' devotion to Dkar po.

Since 2006, village leaders have chosen four people to conduct regular mountain patrols to stop poachers. From mid-May to mid-June, the village sent two men to live on Dkar po for the entire month to stop caterpillar fungi collection there. In order to ensure that no one clandestinely moved onto Dkar po to collect caterpillar fungi after the collection season, one person from each family went to Dkar po and stayed for two days at a collectively decided time from 20 June to 1 July (Gregorian calendar), to collect the fruiting bodies of caterpillar fungi. This was to ensure that no one would be able to collect caterpillar fungi even after patrollers left Dkar po when the collection season was over. They believed that this would make it more difficult for outsiders to find the fungi.

In 2011, they picked 2,700 fruiting bodies, and 3,000 in 2012.

The fruiting bodies were then given to the two men guarding the mountain, who subsequently buried them. The villagers feel that the high price obtained from the sale of caterpillar fungi is not worth the disasters Dkar po may inflict. Villagers' determination to avoid financial benefit rather than angering Dkar po demonstrates their collective decision to venerate Dkar po as protector of minerals and master of wildlife in Gom ri.

VILLAGERS' PERCEPTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Official pronouncements and both Chinese and international mass media agree that western China is in a state of ecological crisis (Harris 2008:27). Regardless of whether such discourse is founded on long-term scientific study of the region, Gom ri villagers believe that they are witnessing the worsening status of the ecosystem. However, locals believe that it is caused by Dkar po's anger, and perceive that proper protection measures and rituals must be conducted to restore balance in the ecosystem as a way to appease Dkar po's wrath.

When Gom ri villagers discuss the current condition of the environment, they often compare the present with a past that they personally experienced or heard about from their parents or grandparents. For elders, environmental conditions of the Old World were far superior to the distressed ecology of the present. When I asked how the past was different from the present, 'Jam dbyangs bzang po made this distinction:

When the human heart/ mind is *dkar po* ['white/ good'], humans and land are *thum* ['intertwined'], connected together; when the human heart/ mind is *nag* ['black/ bad'], humans and land are *thum med* ['disconnected'].

While speaking, he put his palms together, to demonstrate the

thum or intertwined state of the human body with the land in which he resides. His statement suggests that in this distant past, humans, as well as their culture, were part of nature. They were inseparable and, in this inseparable realm, humans are good because they did not exploit natural resources. This differs from the situation today, where there is a division between nature and culture that leads to the exploitation of nature by the bearers of culture.

Related to their subsistence life, villagers attribute the poor quality of their yak milk products to the degradation of the ecosystem. Several villagers I talked with said:

When the *skye khams* ['environment'] is not good, yaks don't have milk. If there is milk, then it's not tasty, there is less butter from milk, and milk has no *bcud* ['nutrition'/ 'fertility'].

The notion of *bcud* is often used by villagers to describe grassland degradation. Villagers comment that grass has no *bcud* these days, which is why their yak milk products lack nutrition.

The villagers also complain about vanishing plant species in relation to *bcud*. For instance, Byams bstan (b. 1973) describes caterpillar fungi and other medicinal herbs:

In the past, there were plenty of medicinal herbs everywhere. People could subsist on the herbs of their own area and didn't need to go elsewhere for herbs. However, because of environmental destruction nowadays, there are few herbs in many places and, even if there are, they aren't very effective.

Gom ri villagers believe that losing *bcud* in the grass and extinction of plant species in the region are because locals disregard Dkar po as master and protector of these resources. In order to restore the *bcud* to a balanced level, villagers need to respect Dkar po, and hold appropriate rituals in his honor.

Gom ri villagers believe that there are two forms of ritual

performances to restore the fertility of nature. The first is offering *bsang* to Dkar po during the annual consecration of Dkar po. Second, burying *gter bum* restores the grassland's fertility. Byams bstan describes burying *gter bum* and offering *bsang* to Dkar po:

Consecrating Dkar po lha bsham pleases Dkar po and will result in timely rainfall, people and livestock will be free from disasters, and people will live a safe, happy life. *Gter bum* contains gold, bronze, and grain. Burying *gter bum* reestablishes *bcud* ['fertility'] of the land, thus pleasing Dkar po. When the land loses nutrition, *gter bum* helps restore it.

Aside from such actions as patrolling Dkar po to protect wildlife and caterpillar fungi, villagers believe that such ritual consecration as making *bsang* offerings prevents future disasters and creates an ecosystem that is favorable for grassland restoration.

Burying *gter bum* entails villagers burying small bags containing grain and sometimes silver and other precious metals, to help restore elements that were originally in the soil but then lost due to mining and other destructive activities. These restorative acts are done in the name of Dkar po, with the hope of pleasing him and bringing *bcud* back to the land. These actions by Gom ri villagers suggest that in the face of perceived environmental degradation, villagers need new interpretations of and preventive measures for their degrading surroundings.

PARALYZED BODIES

Dkar po's wrath projects collectively on the whole of certain geographical locations through such calamities as earthquakes and snow disasters, and also to individuals in the village for violating

Dkar po's wishes. The fear of punishment for individual behavior restricts locals, because they have witnessed "facts" that demonstrate Dkar po's physical punishment.

Connecting different events to cause-effect cycles is common in Gom ri. Misfortunes and illnesses are often ascribed to improper behavior regarding Dkar po, for instance, Bstan nor (b. 1980) gave this account of two hunters in Gom ri:

In Gom ri there were two friends whose wives were sisters. These two men enjoyed hunting and killed whatever wild animals that they saw, such as snow leopards, bears, blue sheep, musk deer, and so on. Dkar po lha bsham finally grew wrathful and caused the two friends to fight each other. In the end, one killed the other, but the survivor's hands and legs became paralyzed and he could only move by crawling to move. He still lives in Gom ri.

This statement suggests that Dkar po is capable of controlling individual behavior and, when killing of wildlife occurs, Dkar po resorts to punishment as severe as death. The concept of *bzha'* 'paralysis' as punishment is prominent in association with Dkar po. For instance, another hunter in Gom ri was punished by having his limbs paralyzed, as described by Chos bzang (b. 1957):

A man in Gom ri killed many animals such as snow leopards, leopards, and musk-deer near Mdzo lding zam kha.¹² His legs finally became paralyzed and claws grew on the back of his hands. He was terrified and moved to 'Bri stod County.

This statement suggests that Dkar po seriously punished the man, who could only save his own life by fleeing to 'Bri stod County, outside Dkar po's jurisdiction.

Regardless of the cause of the illnesses described above, what

¹² Mdzo lding zam kha is a small lake at the foot of Dkar po.

Gom ri villagers perceive as noteworthy and real is that these illnesses and conflicts relate to the afflicted individuals' wrong behavior regarding Dkar po. Actual conflicts and illnesses in the community become evidence for Dkar po's authority to punish, convincing villagers that killing wildlife leads to severe repercussions.

Gom ri villagers believe that such punishment is the result of destroying the environment and killing wildlife. Restoring balance to the ecosystem is thus undertaken by venerating Dkar po as protector of minerals and animals in Gom ri.

These perceived punishments limit villagers' actions, creating a moral conservation zone through fear of Dkar po's wrath, originating from Dkar po's role as warrior deity and Dharma protector shifting to his role as master and protector of local resources.

CONCLUSION

Changing roles are not uncommon for mountain deities. Hazod (1998:72) discusses role changes of mountain deities from a group ancestor to *yul lha* 'local deity', and then to Dharma protector. What is important here, is the roles mountain deities assume in response to a specific socio-political, environmental context. Dkar po's shift from regional warrior deity and Dharma protector, to protector and master of local resources may create a strong, lasting conservation drive among Gom ri villagers, signifying that locals are extremely concerned about changes in their ecosystem in the face of threats to their environment. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the roles of Dkar po as warrior deity and Dharma protector did not vanish or fade away due to his new roles as the master and protector of the local environment. Dkar po has all these roles simultaneously. The emphasis and importance of different roles are strengthened during different periods. Under current perceived notions of

environmental degradation, Dkar po's role as the master and protector of the local environment is strengthened by locals who have been motivated to protect the natural environment.

Scientific study of Tibetan sacred sites by Chinese ecologists suggests that such sites play an important role in conservation (Shen et al. 2012). Indeed, as the case of Dkar po suggests, mountain deities might play a stronger role in promoting local conservation actions. Mining within the jurisdiction of mountain deities damages the local ecosystem and environmental cultural practices that have been passed down for generations. Furthermore, political instability may result when mountains are desecrated, creating mass protests against mining companies, which usually have robust connections with authorities. The power and interests of the state to implement projects intended to extract natural resources from Yul shul and other areas are very significant, especially given these resources' commercial value. Even if the mountain deity belief system helps strengthen national conservation efforts and effectiveness, what locals believe about mountain deities is often ignored as superstitious and meaningless to outsiders. It remains to be seen if locals' devotion to this particular mountain deity will be useful in restricting exploitation of local resources.

Such sacred sites as mountain deities are in danger of vanishing in the face of statist modernization projects and changes in local villagers' way of life. Such projects often emphasize, and provide financial support for sedentarization of local herders by concentrating them in towns to lead an "urban" more "developed" life. The success of such projects is debatable, e.g., Dbang 'dus sgrol ma, a native of Yul shul, writes that a resettlement effort in Yul shul County that she studied:

...did not economically benefit locals; poverty alleviation was not realized. The majority of the resettled herders struggled to make a living as they shifted from a subsistence to a consumerist lifeway. The production system of the resettled herders changed

from multi-livestock production to no source of production, consequently reducing herders' income. Relocated herders mainly depended on collecting and selling caterpillar fungus for cash income in 2007 (2012:36).

However, many young people I talked to in Gom ri prefer urban life over their forebears' way of life. These two trends re-spatialize locals' way of living that disconnects younger generations from their ancestral mountain deities because of the differences in spatial locations of mountain deities and their preferred urban livelihood space.

The last issue speaks to the concern of a Gom ri villager I previously addressed – the intertwined state of nature and humans. Locals protect the mountain and its flora and fauna and, in return, Dkar po ensures locals' safety. This state of interconnectedness may be unravelled by urbanization, sedentarization, and modernization projects that disrupt reciprocity-based relations between locals and Dkar po. This disruption of order may ultimately lead to objectification of nature, an entity that, rather than being part of culture, becomes situated outside the cultural realm and available for economic exploitation.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'bri stod འབྲི་སྟོད། (Zhiduo 治多)
'jam dbyangs འཇམ་དབྱངས།
'jam dbyangs bzang po འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཟང་པོ།
'jam dga' འཇམ་དགའ།
'jig rten gsar ba འཇིག་རྟེན་གསར་པ།
'jig rten rnying ba འཇིག་རྟེན་རྟིང་པ།
bcud བཅུད།
bdag po བདག་པོ།
bde ba བདེ་བ།
bde chen བདེ་ཆེན། (Diqing 迪庆)
bla ma བླ་མ།
bla ma blo brtan བླ་མ་བློ་བརྟན།
blo bzang nor bu བློ་བཟང་ནོར་བུ།
bsang བསང།
bsang khri བསང་ཁྲི།
bskal nyi བསྐལ་ལྷི། (Ganning 甘宁)
bsod nams བསོད་ནམས།
bstan dbang བསྟན་དབང།
bstan nor བསྟན་ནོར།
bstan srung བསྟན་སྲུང།
byams bstan བྱམས་བསྟན།
byang thang བྱང་ཐང། (Qiangtang 羌塘)
bzha' བཞའ།
chab mdo ཆབ་མདོ། (Changdu 昌都)
chos bzang ཆོས་བཟང།
chos rje rin po che ཆོས་རྗེ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།
chos skyong ཆོས་སྟོང།

chu mar leb རྩུ་མར་ལེབ། (Qumalai 曲玛莱)
dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu དབྱར་རྩ་དགུན་འབྲ། (dongchong xiacao 冬虫夏草)
dgra lha དག་ལ།
dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས། (Ganzi 甘孜)
dkar po དཀར་པོ།
dkar po lha bsham དཀར་པོ་ལྷ་བཤམ།
g.yang thar གཡང་ཐར། (Yunta 云塔)
gnyan གཉན།
gom ri གོམ་རི། (Gangri 岗日)
gom ri khog གོམ་རི་ཁོག།
gter bum གཏེར་བུམ།
gzhi bdag གཞི་བདག།
hwa shul ཧྲ་ཤུ། (Haxiu 哈秀)
khams ཁམས།
khor yug gtor brlag byed mkhan ཁོར་ཡུག་གཏོར་བརྒྱལ་བྱེད་མཁན།
khu ga po ཁུ་ག་པོ།
klu ལུ།
mdzo lding zam kha མཛོ་ལྷིང་ཟམ་ཀ།
mi dkar rta dkar མི་དཀར་རྟ་དཀར།
mi la na tsha med མི་ལ་ན་ཆ་མེད།
mi nag rta nag མི་ནག་རྟ་ནག།
mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན། (Qinghai 青海)
muyecun བཤེད་ཀྱངས་རུ་གྲོ།
nag chu ནག་ཆུ།
nag dus lha bsham ནག་དུས་ལྷ་བཤམ།
nor gzhung རྩོན་གཞུང།
nyams 'gro ཉམས་འགོ།
Padmasambhawa (slob dpon pad ma 'byung gnas སྤོབ་དཔོན་པད་མ་འབྲུང་
གནས།)

phyugs la god kha med ཕུགས་ལ་གོད་ཀ་མེད།
phyur mar gzhung ཕུར་མར་གཙུང་།
rdza ri rtse mo dung gi pho brang རྩ་རི་རེ་མོ་དུང་གི་ཕོ་བྲང་།
rgyas bzang རྒྱལ་བཟང་།
ri bo brgyud khrid kyi dus རི་བོ་བརྒྱུད་ཀྱི་དུས།
rong po རོང་པོ། (Longbao 隆宝)
rtsam pa རུས་པ།
sems can རེས་པ་བཟང་།
sems can gyi bdag po རེས་པ་བཟང་གི་བདག་པོ།
ser yu རེར་ཡུ།

Shan Shui Conservation Center (Shanshui ziran baohu zhongxin
山水自然保护中心)

shengtai buchang 生态补偿

Shengtai yimin 生态移民

Sipeitao 四配套

skye khams སྐེ་ཁམས།

skye rgu སྐེ་རྒྱ། (Jiegu 结古)

srog chags gsod mkhan སྐྱོག་ཆགས་གསོད་མཁན།

thos rgyang ཐོས་རྒྱང་།

thub bstan ཐུབ་བསྟན།

thum ཐུམ།

Tsering Bum (tshe ring 'bum ཚེ་རིང་འབུམ།)

tshe ring nor bu ཚེ་རིང་ནོར་བུ།

wa long ལ་ལོང་། (Walong 哇陇)

yuan 元

yul lha ཡུལ་ལྷ།

yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ། (Yushu 玉树)

